

No prison sentence in fatal I-95 wreck

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BY KEITH EPPS

A man whose split-second decision to change lanes on Interstate 95 resulted in the death of a 9-year-old boy won't have to serve any jail time.

Araz Noorie Rashed, 55, of Dumfries was driving south on I-95 in Stafford on Aug. 16 when he became tragically linked to a New York family that was looking forward to a vacation in Williamsburg.

Rashed abruptly switched lanes near the Garrisonville exit to avoid a vehicle that had abruptly slowed in front of him, and he struck a van carrying the Petillo family from Floral Park, N.Y.

The youngest of three sons, 9-year-old Steven Petillo, died instantly as the result of the crash.

Yesterday, Rashed got a suspended 12-month jail sentence in Stafford Circuit Court.

Rashed, who pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of reckless driving, was also fined \$2,500.

With Steven's parents and two brothers looking on, Rashed testified that he is tormented by the tragedy and said he hopes that the Petillos can one day forgive him.

"It happened so fast," Rashed said. "Many nights I asked God why he didn't take me instead of that young boy."

Rashed said he moved from the left lane to avoid a crash, not cause one. He said he didn't see the Petillos' van until it was too late.

The impact caused the Petillos' vehicle to flip over several times and go down an embankment.

Defense attorney Stuart Sullivan said that although the results were tragic, Rashed's actions did not merit jail time.

Sullivan said there was no evidence of speeding, alcohol or cellphone usage. He said a number of witnesses were interviewed, and none of them said anything about Rashed driving erratically.

Sullivan said Rashed, who came to the United States from Iraq as a teenager and eventually became a citizen, was a defense contractor for the Army for several years in Iraq.

He had no criminal record and has been an exemplary citizen, Sullivan said.

"This was a mere moment of not paying attention that led to a fatality," Sullivan said.

Prosecutor Eric Olsen said Rashed deserved to serve 12 months, the maximum penalty allowed by law.

"This is the type of case for which the maximum penalty is in order," Olsen said. "That family continues to suffer every day."

Judge J. Martin Bass was clearly sympathetic to the Petillos, but he did not order jail time.

"No family should ever have to shoulder such a burden," the judge said. "But no sentence can restore the child that they lost."

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